Exploring Trends and Challenges in Sociological Research

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Abstract
This is the first e-special issue for the journal *Sociology* and its chosen focus is the article 'The coming crisis of empirical sociology' by Savage and Burrows (2007). This article challenged sociologists with a variety of questions about the role, relevance and methodological opportunities for sociological research in the 21st century. On publication it stoked the already charged debates on a public sociology (Burawoy, 2004), the role of publicly funded research (ESRC, 2009) and relevance of sociological research in an age of burgeoning social media (Brewer and Hunter,
2006). This e-special provides a reprise of these debates and explores relevant papers in *Sociology*, as well as alerting readers to recurring themes and new directions on the topic of methods and social research.

Keywords
empirical sociology, methodology, public sociology, Savage and Burrows, social media, social research methods

The launch of this e-special of *Sociology* – the first compiled from published contributions to the journal – was triggered by the number of citations and downloads of the article by Savage and Burrows (2007) 'The coming crisis of empirical sociology'. In this article, Savage and Burrows presented a series of challenges for social researchers. These included questions about the role, relevance and methodological opportunities for sociological research in the 21st century. On publication it stoked the already charged debates on a public sociology (Burawoy, 2004), the role of publicly funded research (ESRC, 2009) and relevance of sociological research in an age of burgeoning social media (Brewer and Hunter, 2006). This e-special provides a reprise of these debates and explores relevant articles in *Sociology*, as well as alerting readers to recurring themes and new directions on the topic of methods and social research. In this introduction we outline the origins of this e-special, the initial debate and responses generated by the Savage and Burrows (2007) article, and explain our choice of articles exploring future trends and challenges.

During a quinquennial review of *Sociology* in late 2011, board members, along with col- leagues from the publishers Sage, were open-mouthed at figures demonstrating the high number of citations and downloads of this one article by Savage and Burrows. We volunteered to examine this further through the idea of an e-special issue coalescing around debates generated by that article. Our task seemed easy enough; consider the issues raised by Savage and Burrows (2007) and various responses were offered. However, to our surprise, after two responses from Crompton (2008) and Webber (2009) respectively, few articles in

Sociology directly addressed the issues raised. Our subsequent tracking of citations and debates found that the active engagement and high number of citations took place in other journals including the British Sociological Association (BSA) parallel journals, *Cultural Sociology* and *Work, Employment and Society*.

Have the contributors to *Sociology* gone quiet on methodological matters? In short the answer is no. Submissions on the topic of methods have been steady but not increased. Articles submitted to the journal have considered some timely developments on methodological matters and progressed broader debates. With the growth in specialist journals it may well be the case that authors submit to these, encouraging debates to evolve across the social sciences. Nonetheless, it is important to maintain healthy debates on the role and relevance of social research in teaching, public debates and research practices through the pages of *Sociology*. We hope this e-special will contribute to those debates.

The challenges and issues introduced by Savage and Burrows (2007) include:

- The breadth and availability of data generated by social media research organisations and companies. The growth in this work presents key challenges to traditional modes of developing, funding and conducting sociological research;
- The assumed 'jurisdiction' of sociologists in the methodological 'repertoires' of the survey and interviews no longer hold. Social scientists ignore at their peril changes in who can, and will, undertake research;
- The time it takes to gain funding from research councils, trusts and foundations, and to complete social research projects may enhance quality but is too slow for many users in policy and practice arenas;
- A final controversial and provocative statement urging sociologists to 'abandon a sole focus on causality (which we are very bad at) and analysis and embrace instead an interest in *description and classification* …' This call for a 'descriptive sociology does not involve sole reliance on narrative but seeks to link narrative, numbers and images in ways that engage with, and critique, the kinds of routine transactional analysis that now proliferate.'

In summary, the notion of 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift, 2005), namely that much is known about us and our context with data acquired through surveillance and monitoring, has resulted in a growing 'commercial' social research. The potential for sociologists to offer explanation through social theory is said to be less relevant than in previous decades when the work of, among others, Bott (1968) on family and marriage, or Halsey (1980) and Goldthorpe (1980) on social mobility, gained public recognition. Where sociology is still in the public gaze it deals less in empirical work and more in exploring social change, proposing social trends, offering projections and new terms such as, for example, the 'third way' (Giddens, 1998) or 'flexible' social relationships (Sennett, 2002).

To explore these and related issues we have brought together 10 articles in this e-special. These are organised into three sections:

- Challenges and responses: the original article, two responses (Crompton, 2008; Webber, 2009), the reply to these from Savage and Burrows (2009) and the article by Uprichard (2012) which takes up challenges on causality and description through examining the application of the innovative software package Wordle.
- Methodological issues: three articles addressing wider methodological issues: Cohen et al. (2011) on the methodological impact of feminism, Ruppert (2011) on population metrics and Williams et al. (2008) examining sociology students' attitudes towards quantitative methods.
- Methodological developments: two articles exploring methodological developments: Murthy (2008) on recent trends in digital ethnography and Robinson and Schulz's (2009) examination of virtual ethnographies.

In making any selection we appreciate readers may question the inclusion of some articles and exclusion of others. We are aware of the lively and on-going debate on quantitative methods as illustrated in the article by Byrne (2012). This article responds to the assertion in the Benchmarking Review of UK Sociology that the discipline has a deficit in quantitative methods with Byrne (2012: 22) concluding:

> We will not go forward in a good way if the quantitative issue is understood only in terms of deficit in techniques and if we accept that conventional statistical methods form 'the core of social science'.

Thus Byrne (2012) draws our attention to myriad developments in social research methods, some of which draw upon social media, examples of which are in the articles by Murthy (2008) and Robinson and Schulz (2009).

Rather than present a resume of each article in chronological order, we have chosen to illuminate debates on two key topics raised by Savage and Burrows (2007), namely causality and description, and subsequently the impact of dynamic social media on research methods.

Cause, Causality and Impact

The responses to these challenges were led by Crompton (2008: 1222), who takes issue with the Savage and Burrows' assertion on causality, arguing there is a 'danger of a return to the binary standpoint-taking' which proved so unhelpful, and indeed divisive, to sociology in past decades. Given the current context of the run-up to the Research Excellence Framework with the requirement of impact case studies, Crompton's words resonate when she asserted that if causes cannot be understood then sociologists are unable to 'identify policies or strategies that might bring about emancipatory social change' (2008: 1222). In an age when research councils are pushing researchers to demonstrate 'impact' then surely an engagement with social causes and recommendations for changes in policy and practices are particularly relevant to sociologists. Thus, as Crompton notes, in a world of complexity, deepening inequalities and change, sociology has a role to describe, interpret and understand but also to be concerned with underlying causes.

In their response to Crompton, Savage and Burrows seek to clarify what their deliberately provocative statement about causality and description actually meant. They begin by reminding readers that this was a summary of statements made elsewhere by other sociologists. Far from wishing to dismiss causality, Savage and Burrows argue that they simply sought to 'debunk the complacency' of the 'almost unthinking veneration given to causality' by asserting that description is also important (2009: 769). 'The main point is that it is not helpful to contrast description with causality', instead they seek to 'problematise a clear differentiation between descriptive and causal forms of analysis' (2009:769). Fine, but are we silenced by the politics of funding and fear of criticism as wasters of taxpayers' money? They conclude that this is an area where a lot more thought needs to take place, laying down a challenge to the readers of *Sociology* that has not been taken up to any great extent. Understanding social causes need not necessarily involve a narrow positivist concern with a statistically verifiable causality. Perhaps we might do well to distinguish between cause and the more technical term 'causality'.

This point resonates with the conclusions drawn by Cohen et al. in their article on the methodological impact of feminism. In addressing the persistent 'competition between methodological paradigms', they highlight the need for 'considerable shifts in the normative practices of both quantitative researchers and feminists' (2011: 583). Feminists need to engage more explicitly with quantitative methods, while quantitative researchers need to adopt a more critically reflexive approach to the ontology of research. Quantitative techniques can be highly useful, if, following on from Crompton's observation above, they 'enable systematic, population-level gender inequalities to be exposed' producing necessary information to bring about social change (2008: 1222).

The discussion on description and cause is further explored in a recent article by Uprichard (2012). This article takes as its starting point Savage and Burrows' (2007) statement on causality and description in their original article. Uprichard (2012: 2, as in review version) makes a strong case for causality 'to remain firmly on the sociologist's table of activities'. In fact, the argument proposed here fits well with the later clarification offered by Savage and Burrows by breaking down the polarised dichotomy and instead seeking a linking mechanism between these two activities: 'Description pro- vides, if you will, the soil from where causal modes of inquiry can germinate and grow' (Uprichard, 2012: 6). Hence, description and causality need to work 'hand in hand in order to assess the validity of either' (2012: 8). As Byrne (2012: 19) also notes, 'causality cannot be established by assigning partial contributions to discrete variables', instead we need to think in terms of 'complex causes' including 'human agency'.

The question of how quantitative methods can be used by sociology begs the deeper question of whether or not sociologists have the necessary skills to develop and apply such techniques. After all, as Byrne (2012: 14) argues, 'many UK sociologists are to all intents and purposes essentially innumerate'. This point has been further explored by Williams et al. (2008) in the imaginatively titled article: 'Does British Sociology Count?'. They argue that while professional academic sociology in the UK 'privileges qualitative approaches in its research',

the kind of sociology practised in the public sector by health authorities, for example, is much more 'quantitative in focus' (2008: 1005). Are we as academics training sociologists of the future with the necessary range of skills? Williams et al. found that students tended to view sociology as closer to arts and humanities than science. It is not their intention to argue for a shift towards quantification, rather Williams et al. (2008) 'advocate a pluralistic, empirically engaged sociology' such that students are 'competent in a range of quantitative and qualitative methods'. Otherwise, they argue, 'the discipline is likely to become increasingly constrained'.

New Technologies and Social Media

In terms of future methodological challenges, no area is growing faster and producing more opportunities, but also challenges, for researchers than new communication technologies and social media. This point has been explored by several recent articles in *Sociology*. New technologies are not only generating new kinds of data but also raising methodological challenges for sociology. The transactional data collected by Tesco Clubcards, as Ruppert (2011: 220) argues, construct social categories and classifications, enacting populations but also producing subjects. Ruppert (2011: 228) is also critical of the descriptive turn in sociology which has moved away from 'causal, depth models to patterns, regularities and surface phenomena'. She adds that the classification of data patterns cannot be understood simply through description. Categories on a census form, for example, can influence ways of self-identification. She uses the term 'agencement' to capture 'the mutually constitutive relations betweens logics, humans and technologies' (2011: 225). Ruppert concludes by emphasising the need for critical engagement with population met- rics. There is a role for sociology here not simply to understand and describe population data but also to analyse the processes and causes underpinning particular patterns and the specific practices of classification. Classifying any group or population involves processes of naming, labelling, co-production and performance. Ruppert (2011: 224) reminds us of Mol's comment 'a population is a precarious accomplishment'.

As everyday life is becoming increasingly technologically mediated, the research field is changing (Murthy, 2008). As illustrated in the articles by Murthy and Robinson and Schulz, additional technologies such as blogs, internet forums or social networking sites create additional capacity to interact with, and research, a wide range of geographically dispersed people. Murthy (2008) clearly demonstrates the huge advantages of online questionnaires which are not only cheaper and easier to administer but also save the time and tedium of laborious data entry. However, the pervasive use of internet forums as a cheap and easily available source of data raises questions about how 'cyberfieldsites' become constructed as 'real' fields of research in which to carry out participant observation (Robinson and Schulz, 2009). As Robinson and Schulz (2009: 692) note, 'the internet's constant evolution necessitates continual reassessment of fieldwork methods'. For sociology this raises not only methodological but also considerable ethical questions. As this kind of research becomes increasingly popular, one can almost imagine the near farcical scenario of 'lurking' cyber-ethnographers unwittingly observing each other

interacting in anonymous chatrooms.

Conclusions

It seems to us that several authors have attacked Savage and Burrows (2007) for their provocative assertion, but perhaps without considering the later clarification (Savage and Burrows, 2009). In that sense Savage and Burrows have succeeded, to some extent, in challenging sociologists to consider the role and mutual relationship between cause and description. While many articles, especially those using qualitative methods, tend to imply or infer some notion of cause (or even causality) there has been less explicit engagement with what the concept means and how it is used than Savage and Burrows (2007, 2009) may have expected.

The challenge for us, as sociologists, is not only to develop and teach the necessary skills to utilise the new opportunities presented by knowing capitalism, public sociology and new social media, but also to maintain a healthy critique and reflexivity about how these construct and present social realities. As exemplified through the so-called Arab Spring and London riots in 2011, new technology is not simply capturing but actively constituting social interaction. Is it our role as sociologists to describe and understand or to dig deeper and identify the social causes underpinning such complex social processes?

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